

PM ready to help fund sewage plant

Lowe says there's no need to wait for study, endorses idea of building 3 treatment facilities

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper committed federal funds Friday to build a sewage treatment plant in Victoria but said it's up to municipal authorities to get busy and ask for the cash.

That prompted Victoria Mayor Alan Lowe, chairman of the Capital Regional District, to leap at the money and with other political and business leaders to dismiss the significance of a \$600,000 scientific report to be presented to the CRD board July 12.

"We proceeded in Saint John, N.B., with the first phase of sewage treatment in a tripartite agreement and we're certainly open to the same thing here," Harper said in a media scrum, following a Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce lunch in Victoria. "We would expect the initiative for that would come from municipal authorities."



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Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Building a treatment facility is expected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Under schemes suggested so far, the three levels of government -- federal, provincial and municipal -- would share the cost equally.

Since September 2005, the CRD has deflected discussions of sewage treatment pending a review of the area's sewage practices. The CRD assigned that task to seven scientists with a Florida-based environmental company called SETAC (the Society of Environmental Toxicology and Chemistry). But politicians and business leaders said Friday: "It's time for us to deal with it."

"I believe we should [go ahead]," Lowe said, noting he needs a consensus from the 21-member CRD board. "I am determined to make it happen."

"You might as well jump at it when money is available. Even if some people believe what we're doing right now works, it's still not going to be good enough for the future."

The CRD pumps about 129 million litres of sewage a day through screens -- to remove solids -- and then into the Juan de Fuca Strait through underwater pipes at Clover and Macaulay points.

Langford Mayor Stew Young said the federal money offer is minor compared with deciding where to put sewage, the nature of treatment (primary, secondary or tertiary), and whether the federal and provincial governments will commit to possible building cost increases.

"We all know eventually it's going to be done, but that's just the first hurdle," Young said. "Tomorrow you've got the cheque, but where do you put it? That's the question."

Both Young and Lowe are pushing the idea of three plants, with one in the West Shore, instead of one or two bigger plants. Likewise, the federal funding should be "split out to two or three treatment facilities," Young said.

The issue would have to go to a public referendum to enable the CRD to finance its third of the bill through a loan, Lowe said. The cost can't be determined until the form of treatment has been decided.

Robin Adair, chairman of the Greater Victoria Chamber of Commerce, followed Lowe in dismissing the significance of SETAC's eventual findings. "To us, it's a business issue," Adair said. "I think there is an awful lot of science out there that is mixed.

"It's the optics. If our visitors are not happy with a lot of raw sewage in our strait and a lot of people in Victoria are not happy about it, then we have to do something about it. The optics outweigh any other consideration. It's time for us to deal with it."

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